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What Soviet defectors try to tell us

X Arkady N. Shevchenko is not the first Soviet citizen to break with Moscow to warn the West of the Kremlin's true intentions, nor will he be the last. But he is the highest-ranking official to defect to the United States since World War II, and his book, which has been summarized in *Time* and will be published March 1 by Alfred Knopf, should be required reading for American politicians, policymakers, and voting citizens.

From his vantage point as principal adviser to Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in Moscow to his position as undersecretary-general of the United Nations in New York, Mr. Shevchenko gained a unique insight into the basic motivations of Soviet policy from the ebullient era of Nikita Khrushchev to the uncertain rule of Konstantin Chernenko.

Although Mr. Shevchenko's 2½ years as a CIA agent in his U.N. job before he finally defected make for good spy drama, the meat of the book is his detailed account from the inside of Soviet foreign policy-making over a period of 20 years.

It adds up to a sober and chilling description of how the leaders of the other superpower really think and secretly act in the absence of any legislative or judicial restraint or any informed public opinion.

In important ways, Mr. Shevchenko corroborates and adds new credibility to what Russian defectors and dissidents, at the risk of their lives, have been trying to tell the American people over a period of many years. From his internal exile in the closed city of Gorki, Andrei Sakharov has been trying to get out the message that the West must close ranks and maintain its defenses.

Before he was executed as a spy, Col Oleg Penkovsky gave the West

accurate information on the secret Soviet military buildup.

But in addition to confirming once again that the Kremlin, despite changing leadership, remains consistently committed to the incremental expansion of the Soviet socialist system throughout the

world, Mr. Shevchenko has fascinating detail to add as to just how the different Kremlin leaders reacted to their perception of American strength or weakness.

White House officials and State Department officers who have spent long debriefing sessions with Mr. Shevchenko find him a mine of information. Most revealing is his account of how quickly and decisively the Soviet leaders react to any signs of American vacillation.

Mr. Shevchenko is no fanatical zealot and does not believe the Soviets are prepared to risk nuclear war with the United States. Rather, he sees them as continuously probing for tactical advantage but quite prepared to respect American will and determination when they run into it. Thus Mr. Khrushchev read President Kennedy's vacillation at the Bay of Pigs as an invitation to build the Berlin wall and to install the missiles in Cuba, but backed away in the face of firm American reaction.

Similarly, Leonid Brezhnev saw the U.S. congressional decision to cut all aid to Jonas Savimbi's UNITA guerrillas as a green light to increase sharply the number of

Cuban troops in Angola, where they remain to this day. President Carter's vacillations encouraged the Kremlin to gamble on its intervention in Ethiopia and eventually led to the outright invasion of Afghanistan.

In the light of such adventurous

opportunism, this reporter asked Mr. Shevchenko what the reaction in Moscow might be to a congressional rejection of President Reagan's pending request for a renewal of military assistance to the Contras fighting against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

Mr. Shevchenko replied that the Soviets would inevitably see this as a sign of American weakness and would cautiously move to increase the Soviet military intervention in a region that Foreign Minister Gromyko has called "a boiling cauldron ripe for revolutionary expansionism."

If Mr. Shevchenko in his book dashes very cold water on the hopes of many Americans that gestures of unilateral restraint might encourage the Soviets to follow suit, he also does not encourage the illusions of those who believe that the Soviets are in such deep economic trouble that collapse is imminent.

Mr. Shevchenko foresees a protracted period of geopolitical competition in which the best hope is a steady American determination to stay the course.

If anything can shorten this dangerous rivalry and eventually open up Russian society, Reagan officials believe it to be the increasing exposure of the Soviet people to the reality of the external world and to the facts of life within Russia itself. That is why the Reagan administration particularly welcomes the recent decision of the Israeli government to allow powerful VOA broadcasting into the southern U.S.S.R. from well-located transmitting sites in Israel.

As Arkady Shevchenko's own experience tends to show, breaking the grip of indoctrination, propaganda, and censorship makes it more difficult for the Soviet Politburo to impose its decisions made in secret on an entire people.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.